



Character Building Ministries
1320 Saddleback Road, York, PA 17404

(570) 772-1643

www.CBMinistries.com

RUNNING ON EMPTY: The Importance of Personal Devotions

by Joel Rishel

This article originally appeared in Edify (Fall 2001), CBM's free newsletter for camp directors. If you would like to begin to receive a free copy of Edify bi-annually, just send your camp name and address to us. Permission is granted to duplicate and copy this material.

Let me tell you a story. I knew a counselor who had served effectively at a Christian camp for several years. He was diligent, responsible, well liked by the campers, and spiritually mature. It was not a surprise to anyone when he was asked to begin serving in leadership roles.

My story about him has to do with his first year as a Program Director. He started off the summer with lofty spiritual goals for himself, for his staff, and for the campers. By the second week of camp the trials and pressures of equipping his staff, combined with the overwhelming needs of campers, pretty much absorbed all his attention, and he began to neglect his spiritual walk with Christ. His ministry began to be tainted with pride and arrogance. He told himself that he was spiritually strong and mature and really didn't have the luxury to devote as much time as he would like to personal devotions.

By about the middle of the summer he was continually comforting himself with the thought that the majority of his work was spiritual and devotional in nature. Time spent preparing meditations and Bible studies for the staff or for campers would serve as personal devotions. Pretty soon the alarm clock was permanently set to 6:50 instead of 6:00, allowing just enough time to put in his contacts and run to the 7:00 meeting with his counselors.

As the final weeks of that summer slipped away, he realized that his spiritual leadership wasn't at all what he thought it would be. He was embroiled in numerous personality conflicts. His arrogant approach to leadership had increasingly offended others. When caring friends attempted to bring input and correction into his life, he responded self-defensively. While the program itself ran smoothly, his total spiritual influence and effectiveness ranked somewhere between poor and non-existent.

If you haven't already guessed, this story is about myself. I am completely ashamed to confess that by the end of that summer I hardly even felt guilty for skipping personal devotions. I plowed ahead in my role of leadership without really sitting at the feet of Jesus. I attempted to serve and minister to others without feeding myself from the Word of God. My entire summer was essentially void of personal prayer.

The burnout I experienced was more than just physical fatigue. It was spiritual. The difficulties and conflicts I faced had very little to do with others. They had very much to do with the fact that I had allowed sin to creep into my life unchecked. The lack of impact I had on others wasn't their fault for not listening; it was because I really had nothing spiritual to say.

I wish I could live that summer over again. I would reset the alarm clock for 6:00, and commit myself to spending time alone with God every morning. I would hold myself accountable to several close friends to ensure that I did not neglect that time. I would make them promise to regularly ask me what God was teaching me. I would value prayer so highly that the busier my schedule became, the more time I would feel the need to be in prayer. I would constantly remind myself that I should do more than just pray *for* the ministry; prayer *is* the ministry.

Psalm 23 would become more precious and real to me. The Lord is my Shepherd, so I must sit at His feet each morning. I would pray that He would lead me beside still waters and refresh me in green pastures. He would restore my soul only when my soul was quiet in His presence. The inevitable valleys of summer camp would pose no real harm because I would be more diligent to pursue His presence every day. The rod of Scripture, as illuminated by the staff of the Holy Spirit, would comfort me when I spent time reflecting upon what God was saying to me through His Word. My head would be freshly anointed with the oil of His grace day by day. My cup would be filled up and spilling over with His mercy and goodness and righteousness. Then—and only then—would I be able to serve others from the overflow of what the Lord would first be doing in my heart.

Having experienced the damage and destruction of a prayerless ministry and service devoid of personal devotions, I never want to go back to that again. My own spiritual walk with my Good Shepherd must be my highest priority. Is it yours, or are you trying to run on empty?